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ABSTRACT

A study examined three examples of classroom reading conferences. Subjects (students and teachers) were in grades 4, 7, and 12. Conversations between the teachers and their students serve to illustrate the different learning environments in each classroom. Results indicated that all three teachers wanted to: (1) provide students an opportunity to talk about their impressions of a book in a non-competitive setting; (2) promote student choice in literature to motivate continued reading; and (3) individualize instruction to support understanding of literature concepts or terminology. Findings suggest that time and place affected the one-on-one situation and, thus, the success of the conferences--seventh graders had inadequate time for individual reading conferences because their teacher had no assistant. The same was true for grade 12, while the fourth grade teacher felt that her conferences worked because she could send students out of the room with adult helpers. For the most part, the teachers' and students' evaluations of successful conferences were connected with how effectively the students had clarified their understanding of a text, how much they had talked, and how much control they had taken during the conference situation. Further research on reading conferences is suggested for the beginning teacher and the second language student. (CR)

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The Language of Reading Conferences

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I choose to do the oral conferencing because I think it frees the child...it is the opportunity to verbalize and visit with another person, getting to know that person better as well as using their oral skills, speaking skills, and for a child who enjoys it, it's just an exhilaration, for a child that is shy or quiet, it brings out their ability to speak to someone else, and it's truly important for nine and ten year olds to learn to speak concisely and clearly with meaning to another individual. (Opal, September)

Reading Conferences in the 4th grade classroom of Opal McCroskey: Building bridges

Mrs. McCroskey's questions let you think first about the story, then about yourself and why you, like, with her question about which character I would want to change places with, you think about yourself and why you liked certain characters. (It's good) because someone else might not like the same character so you have to think about why you liked yours and why someone else picked another and then maybe you can figure out their way of thinking, too. (Anne, 4th grade student, October)

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Example of instructional support

Opal: How did she react to her blindness, do you think?
Lee : She...she didn't like it that much.
Opal: But did she adjust?
Lee : Yeah.
Opal: What did she do to adjust?
Lee : What do you mean?
Opal: Well, how did she learn to live with it?
Lee : Like, her sister told her different things about what they did at school so she would know how act, and after awhile, she got used to being the only blind kid at school.

Reading Conferences in the 7th grade classroom of Elizabeth Lindsay: Finding the middle ground

I think that reading conferences are important to Mrs. Lindsay so she can get to know us better and plan our education more for us. (Miranda, September)

Another example of instructional support: focus on concept attainment and understanding

Eliz: Was there an important message in the book that the characters, that you learned through them?
Mari: Maybe that looks aren't as important or aren't important but your insides are or whatever 'cause...
Eliz: Is that what the main character learned, do you think? That how she dressed wasn't all that important but...
Mari: Oh, she didn't know that. Well, she cared about it, but there's, like, nothing she could do about it. She just wanted to go home (from camp), so I don't know if she really wanted it or not because...
Eliz: So what happened in the book that made you decide that the message of the book...that it's more important what's inside a person than what's on the outside in her looks. Did something happen?
Mari: It was just--I don't know--it was just 'cause she always had the wrong stuff, and all the other girls had the right stuff 'cause they had been to camp before and she hadn't, so a lot of it had to do with being happy with yourself in lots of different situations.

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Reading Conferences in the 12th grade classroom of Tess Adams: Close to perfection

Tess: And now there are possibilities within that cave that might house or harbor that virus?
Tony: They're really concerned about things like, the stalactites, or like the bats or worms in the ground. All the animals, every single one, no matter how small, could possibly carry the virus. They're also kind of concerned about tigers and if, how they can find out if they have the virus, or if they need to kill them.

* * *

Tess: The author, I think, is speculating in the end when he tells us, "This is the revenge of the rain forest." Do you see that?
Tony: Yeah, just like, the population expanding and cutting down the rain forest and taking all sorts of stuff out and now nature is getting back at the humans. I think they said that when you expand into the rain forest, you increase the risk of finding these diseases.
Tess: And what do you think of that personalized view of it?
Tony: I don't know...I don't believe that you can say that nature is making this tough decision or whatever. I can believe that exploring the rain forest might let us find good and bad things, but a personal view?
(Segment of conference over The Hot Zone, October)

A summarizing thought on conferencing and its effect on student motivation

I'm looking for more in my reading. I'm not just reading it to be reading, I'm making correlations to writing styles and what it's trying to say. This has just been an important class for me and as valuable as any other English classes I've had because in this class, I'm taking the initiative and realizing that I get out of it what I put into it. that's a lot different than in my freshman and sophomore classes where I just did what the teacher told me to do and didn't really think about what or why I was doing it. (Brooke)

PREDOMINANT ISSUES IN THE CONSIDERATION OF READING CONFERENCES

Purposes Behind Implementation of Reading Conferences

In all three classrooms, there were many similarities in the teachers' objectives and in the manner in which each implemented the one-on-one situations which suggest that the consistencies across conferences may be inherent to the use of reading conferences. Besides encouraging students to enjoy reading, all three wanted to **1)** provide students an opportunity to talk about their impressions of a book in a situation that did not ask the students to compete with others for the teacher's attention; **2)** promote student choice in literature in the hope that the enjoyment of certain texts or authors would motivate continued reading; and **3)** individualize instruction in a manner that allowed the teachers to model or support student understanding of a concept or of the terminology we commonly use to discuss literature.

The Nature and Function of Language in Reading Conferences

One of the most interesting findings centered around students' awareness that they were being asked two types of questions during the conferences: **text-centered and world-centered**. While this in itself is not so surprising, it is what we learn about the students' ability to respond to the cues inherent in each type of questions and their attitudes concerning these questions that is. Briefly, students at all ages were able to respond to cues inherent in text-centered questions while success with world-centered questions coincided with the number of opportunities to practice responding to this type of question. Consequently, helping the students more clearly recognize the cues inherent in questions by asking them to make an interpretation, an evaluation, or a generalization became part of their learning process.

The Development of Roles

The two types of questions we have been discussing may have a direct correlation to the third research question which focused on the development of roles and their effect on language use during the conferences. In other words, how did teachers encourage or discourage the development of stronger student roles in the conferences and what influence did this have on the students' interactions with the teacher during the conference. For instance, some of the 4th grade students noticed that they had very little power in the library conferences because they were simply responding to the questions posed while they felt a great deal of power in the classroom conferences because they were directly the flow of conversation. In the 7th grade conferences, Matt felt that he wasn't being challenged because his teacher continued to ask him the same questions from one conference to the next; his conference transcripts indicated that he offered minimal responses to these questions. During a 12th grade stimulated recall session, Jack, who thought he had controlled most of the talk time and the direction the conference had taken as far as topics considered, realized as he listened to the tape that he had actually spent more time responding to text-centered questions than he had to questions in which he felt personally invested. From a consideration of all of these situations and the information gained from interviews, recall sessions, and transcripts, I would argue that there is a connection in these situations between the authenticity of the work the students had been asked to do and its connection to the development of roles.

Teacher-Student Evaluation of Conferences: The Components of Success

The one evaluation of the reading conferences that all participants agreed upon was that "they were fun to do." This was followed by student comments (across grade levels) that "it was neat to have the chance to talk to someone about my reaction to a book." However, it is in the comments that followed these first evaluations that we gain insights into how and why these opportunities to "chat" worked so well across grade levels.

For the most part, the teachers and the students' evaluations of successful conferences were connected with **how effectively the students had clarified their understanding of a text, how much they had talked, and how much control they had taken during the conference situation**. The most common evaluation found in education, that of grade assessment, was rarely mentioned by any of the participants. "How I talked about the book so she would know how well I read and understood the book" was a comment typical of those made by students across grade levels when they were asked about the features of a successful conference. The foremost student concern was the manner in which they communicated their reactions, interpretations, and understanding of the text read for the conference, suggesting that because the students felt an investment in the books they had read, they were willing to be challenged by the conference format to share their ideas even as they provided their best answers for the teachers' consideration. The second and third evaluations of conferences focused on the amount of time students talked and how much control the students had taken during the conference. For many of the students, the issues of student-teacher talk-time and power were connected; most of the students suggested that the amount of student talk-time during the conference had a direct correlation to whether they or the teacher was actually controlling the conference. While students across grade levels believed that their teachers had to interact with them during conferences, they also felt that the teacher should control less than half of the talk-time. Thus, in the minds of many of the students, especially the 4th graders, power was derived from the amount of time they talked during the conference; if we accept the student line of thinking, then the 4th grade students had a significant amount of power in the conference.

However, if we connect potential student power to the idea of responsibility, as the three teachers did, then the amount of time the students spoke was not as important as how students were being empowered by their teacher. I would argue that the elementary students felt empowered to share their insights with Opal because she was not expecting to hear one correct answer; encouraging her students to respond to texts through their perceptions was Opal's way of giving power to their intellect, and in doing so, she encouraged their feelings of esteem about what they had accomplished.

In the middle school conferences, we see much of the same kind of empowerment, although Elizabeth may have undermined her intentions somewhat by the decision to make notes to herself during the conferences about student responses and her commitment to a fairly structured conference format that may have stifled student spontaneity. However, because of her reactions to their responses, her students did know that she valued their particular interpretations of a text, and for many of them, this empowerment encouraged their comfort with both the conferences--as indicated by the longer conferences as the semester passed--and their teacher.

The secondary conferences with Tess were where we saw the greatest degree of authentic power held by students. However, Tess did not empower her students through the channels Opal or Elizabeth found most useful; she encouraged them to take stronger roles in the conferences by challenging their responses with her own interpretations, by admitting to them that she had not understood or even liked certain books, and finally, by agreeing with many of their interpretations even as she encouraged them to think about why they had reached certain conclusions. Because Tess wanted the individual students to decide what the course needed to be at that point in their education, this combination of challenge and confirm provided a road, in a sense, for students, and they had to decide the manner in which to travel it. They could ride in the back seat with Tess as tour guide or they could sit in the front seat and provide directions from their own mapping of the textual journey: whatever the choice, it would be the students'.

Time and Place

The final evaluation of the reading conferences concerned time and place and their effect on the on-on-one situation. These are two factors that cannot be ignored when considering the use of reading conferences in the classroom. The teachers, the librarian aides and most of the 7th grade students who participated in this study commented that there was never enough time, especially at the 7th grade level, to facilitate the number of conferences the participants ideally would have preferred. Many of the 7th grade students bemoaned the fact that they only had two opportunities a quarter to conference with Elizabeth. This finding in itself seems to be a factor in favor of the use of reading conference, especially when we consider that students are often less than enthusiastic about some of the teaching strategies employed in classrooms.

In addition, where the conferences were held affected, at times, the quality of conferences given. While the flexible structure of Tess and Opal's classrooms helped to account for the use of conferences, Elizabeth's curricular constraints combined with the belief that her 7th grade students were not, as a group, responsible enough to continue reading while conferences were facilitated at the teacher's desk determined that the number of conference opportunities would be limited. Elizabeth commented that the best conferences were those where she and the student could leave the classroom, go to another room where privacy was ensured, and not worry about the sound level of the discussion; this type of conference could be facilitated only when Elizabeth had another certified teacher in the classroom or if she could hold the conference during her prep time or before or after school.

Opal felt that her conferences worked because she often could send students out of the room with the adult helpers; like Elizabeth, she questioned the 4th grade students' abilities to maintain good work habits if there were a number of conferences occurring around them. Only Tess, with her (mostly) college-bound seniors had no qualms about facilitating conferences in her classroom.

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Implications for Further Research

This study grew out of my own work with reading conferences at the junior high and high school levels. While I felt that I had success with many of my students using this particular approach to language instruction, I was also very aware that for other students, this attempt to encourage their individual discussion of a literary text was not consistently successful. Like many of the reflective teachers with whom I have worked, I began to analyze my practice, considering the elements of the successful interactions as well as those found in the failures. And when I reached some conclusions, I revised my reading conferences and explored again their potential in my classroom.

For my study of classrooms in which reading conferences were being used, I purposely worked with teachers who seemed to have dealt with the failures and created conferences which worked successfully in the majority of cases. Yet the analysis of these classrooms only makes more clear that there are many possibilities, problems, and solutions to be considered before we truly understand the full potential of reading conferences in the classroom. For those reasons, I believe that future research on reading conferences in the classroom should study how less-experienced teachers implement one-on-one reading conferences and examine the use of reading conferences with students who speak English as a second language or need to acquire the language of educational, social, or cultural conventions in order to achieve success in schools.

Reading Conferences and the Beginning Teacher

While the study I undertook offers insight into the implementation of reading conferences by experienced teachers, how do beginning or less-experienced teachers, who may have little or no experience much less information on how to facilitate this teaching strategy, proceed once they have made the decision to use reading conferences? While many teachers have access to the theory necessary to justify a teaching strategy that asks students to take a more active role in the discussion on literature, the more important consideration may be the classroom practices or structures that propelled the fledgling teacher to the decision to use the one-on-one conference. An extension of this would be to analyze the changes the teacher makes over the course of the semester or school year as she becomes aware of what works with her particular group of students. Finally, as in my study, it would be important to interview the student conferees to gain their reactions to the conferences as well as other strategies their teacher is using in combination with the reading conferences; their perceptions as to how the individualization, the modeling of literary practices, and the balance of power are constructed would enlighten us as to why this instructional strategy works more effectively with some students than it does with others.

Reading Conferences and the Second Language Student

Research into the use of reading conferences with students for whom English is a second language or for whom it is one of the dialects they practice--for example, some African-American students who use Black English at home but are expected to communicate with Standard English in educational or other formal contexts--seems very necessary considering our growing awareness--from studies like Shirley Brice Heath's Ways With Words and Mike Rose's Lives on the Boundary--of the importance of language acquisition by our growing number of multicultural students (Au, 1993). Because this study primarily considered reading conferences as they were used with native-English speaking students, an examination of classrooms in which students have a primary language which is not English may offer greater insight on the potential of the individualization that seems inherent in the reading conferences. We may also find out how effective teacher modeling practices within these situations are for second-language students and if the student opportunities to practice the knowledge acquired from conference situations carries over into class discussions of literature.